



This Old Column

Indianapolis Historic Preservation Commission

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Top Ten Misconceptions about IHPC

IHPC's policies and procedures may sometimes seem confusing to property owners. Guidelines may sometimes be misread or misinterpreted. Occasionally, well-intentioned neighbors may pass on misinformation and unknowingly perpetuate a misconception. To separate fact from fiction, IHPC staff took inspiration from Indiana's own "King of Late Night TV" and created the "*Top Ten Misconceptions about IHPC.*"

10. "I submitted my application for a Certificate of Appropriateness, so I thought I could start work."

WRONG! Filing an application is only the first step, and does not grant approval. The application is merely a request. The actual Certificate of Appropriateness (COA) is a different document that you must have in-hand before starting work or getting building permits. The COA is granted by IHPC staff, a Hearing Officer, or by the Commission, depending on the type of request.

9. "When I complete an application, IHPC will immediately issue a Certificate of Appropriateness, right?"

SOMETIMES, BUT NOT USUALLY! Only very simple, straightforward requests can be handled on a same-day basis. As an example a COA for paint colors or new roof shingles can often be approved on-the-spot if the materials and colors are known and meet the standards. A "Reviewer-on-Call" is in the office each day to provide this service if possible.

However, issuing most COAs requires more time than most people realize, and usually cannot be issued on the same day an application is filed. Many applications require public notice and a public hearing. Even applications that only need a staff approval often require a site visit, research, additional documentation or design revision before they can be approved.

8. "An IHPC staff member gave me verbal approval, so it's o.k. to go ahead."

WRONG! THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS A "VERBAL OK." IHPC staff is often asked for advice or to render an opinion about a design or an idea. This is occasionally mistaken as a verbal approval. However, the only approval that counts is a written COA.

7. "The IHPC doesn't care about the back of my house."

WRONG – IN MOST CASES. The IHPC has jurisdiction over alterations to all elevations of a building: front, back and sides (and over back yards, another common misconception.) Some

preservation plans have exceptions specifically written into them, but only for districts identified as “conservation districts” (Ransom Place, Fayette Street, and New Augusta). There are no such exemptions in other districts. It is safest to consult with IHPC staff before assuming there is an “exception.”

6. “I got my COA, but the City’s Building Permit Office won’t issue me a building permit!”

COULD HAPPEN! Most COAs are approved with a list of stipulations. In some cases, those stipulations must be met before a permit can be issued. If that is the case, it will be clearly noted on the COA. For example, new construction projects usually require a pre-construction meeting with IHPC staff and staff approval of final construction drawings before permits may be issued. Once these criteria are met, IHPC staff initials the COA and stamps the plans approved. Now the COA is ready to take to the Permit Office.

5. “I’d like some of that money IHPC uses to rehab those houses.”

WE’VE GOT NONE! Low-to-moderate income homeowners may be eligible for financial assistance from other agencies and some projects may be eligible for federal or state tax credits. However, the IHPC does not renovate buildings and does not provide funds for others to do so. The IHPC’s role is to guide the renovation efforts of property owners within a set of established standards and to protect buildings from being lost. The folks who are really responsible for doing the work are all the private property owners who make up our wonderful historic neighborhoods.

4. “I did my work without a COA and no one stopped me. So, it’s o.k. – right?”

NO! Work performed without a COA is still subject to compliance with the historic area plan and the design review process as outlined in IHPC policies. If work is done without a COA, an application must still be filed requesting its retention. The work will then be reviewed for compliance with guidelines. If the work is appropriate, a COA may be issued. If not appropriate, changes may be required. In all cases, work done without a COA may be subject to late filing fees, stop-work-orders, rescinded permits, delays, expensive corrections, and enforcement by the City Prosecutor. Staff advice: it’s not worth it!

3. “My neighbor is working on his house but I didn’t get a notice – he’s in violation!”

SOMETIMES YES; SOMETIMES NO. Some COAs can be approved and granted by staff, such as painting, siding and window repair, reroofing, gutters and fence installation. In such cases, no public hearing is required, therefore notices are not sent to surrounding neighbors. Some work does not need a COA, such as removing aluminum siding, removing dead trees or minor roof repairs. However, do not hesitate to call the IHPC office if you are not sure. Our most effective way of discovering unauthorized work is from alert neighbors. Stopping such work as early as possible benefits everyone, including the person doing the work.

2. “I don’t need a COA. The door I want to install looks just like the one I’m taking down.”

WRONG! A new door, or any other new feature, is a different thing – even if it looks similar and is subject to IHPC approval. In historic districts, authentic and original materials are important and should not be changed unless there is good reason. By reviewing such requests and issuing COAs, staff is given the opportunity to assess the situation, document legitimate justifications, and recommend alternative actions if more appropriate. A well-intentioned property owner could damage the historic significance of a building by assuming that any historic feature can be replaced as long as it “looks the same.”

1. “I put my COA away somewhere for safe-keeping, so what’s wrong.”

GOOD IDEA – BUT NOT YET! It is very smart to keep your COAs, as well as copies of applications, fee forms and any communication with the IHPC. This record of your dealings with the IHPC is handy for you and helpful to pass on to subsequent owners. However, before you file it away, a COA should be displayed in a location visible from the street during the time that work is being done. That will avoid some of the problems alluded to in the previous questions. Once the work is complete, the certificate may be removed and filed away.

If you have questions regarding IHPC policies and procedures, it is always best to contact IHPC directly at (317) 327-4406. Additional information can be found on the IHPC website at <http://www.indygov.org/histpres>.